

Running head: DISQUALIFYING BACKGROUNDS

Disqualifying Backgrounds for Fire Department Employment

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Certification Statement

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### Abstract

The Hanover Park Fire Department has an average 20% candidate washout rate during employment testing, costing significant taxpayer dollars to find suitable new employees.

Descriptive research was conducted using surveys and interviews. Research questions looked at candidate washout rates in comparable departments, recruitment practices, pre- and post-offer testing and disqualifying backgrounds. Research clearly supports continuing some existing practices while recommending changes to enhance recruitment and reduce liability.

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### Disqualifying Backgrounds for Fire Department Employment

In a 2007 study conducted by the United Press International, firefighters are reportedly the most trusted of all professionals. This Canadian survey found that respondents considered firefighters to be 93% trustworthy as compared to nurses who were rated second with a percentage score of 87% (United Press International, January 2007). Firefighters are permitted access to people's homes and businesses, including their most valued personal belongings, and are tasked with the responsibility of restoring order to out-of-control situations. Firefighters are called upon to provide emergency medical care to children and loved ones. When trapped or involved in situations of grave danger, victims are expected to follow the instruction of firefighters without question. Firefighters face dangers on the job and are given opportunities to place their life on the line to save those they have sworn to protect.

With the high level of responsibility, character and integrity expected of firefighters, the proper selection of firefighting employees is critical. This selection process is extensive and complicated (Haigh, 2003). New candidates must be physically fit and possess an above-average intellectual level including knowledge of mathematics and a strong mechanical aptitude. They must be able to comprehend the written word, follow detailed instructions, construct sentences and complete written reports. Most importantly, they must possess a strong work ethic and a high level of integrity reflected in their personal history with a demonstrated track record that is above reproach (Village of Hanover Park, 2006).

The Hanover Park Fire Department (HPFD) conducts a thorough testing process: physical ability test, written exam, interviews, extensive background investigations, and post-offer psychological, polygraph and medical exams. Over the past five years, over 20% of all post-offer candidates tested failed one or more of these components (Village of Hanover Park,

2004-2008). The problem is that HPFD spends in excess of \$19,000 annually for one testing cycle (Village of Hanover Park, 2008). In some calendar years, the department has been forced to conduct multiple tests to obtain a minimum number of qualified candidates (Village of Hanover Park, 2004-2008). Candidate failures and subsequent “washouts” (candidates initially given a conditional offer and having the offer rescinded) place a significant financial burden on taxpayers who must absorb the costs associated with additional testing to find suitable candidates to fill available positions.

The purpose of this research is to identify recruitment and testing practices that will produce better qualified candidates who are able to pass the rigorous background and psychological investigations. The descriptive research method was employed in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the average candidate “washout” rate of comparable departments?
2. What recruitment practices are successful in obtaining qualified candidates?
3. What pre-offer testing is being conducted to eliminate unqualified candidates?
4. What do comparable departments constitute as a disqualifying background?

These questions were answered through the following activities:

1. Survey of combination/career fire departments and fire protection districts in the State of Illinois.
2. Survey of the Suburban Human Resource Directory members.
3. Interviews conducted with the Director of Human Resources for the Village of Hanover Park. The Human Resource Department, assisted by the fire department, is responsible for new candidate testing and the establishment of the new employee eligibility list.



4. Interviews with Joe Banasiak, Clinical Psychologist & Public Safety Director for Steven A. Laser Associates. Mr. Banasiak conducts all psychological assessments for Hanover Park public safety employees.
5. Interviews conducted with fire service leaders regarding their experiences with employment testing and hiring.
6. Review of the last five years of employment eligibility lists and testing records for Hanover Park Fire Department.

#### Background and Significance

The Hanover Park Fire Department is a municipal organization providing emergency services to the Village of Hanover Park. The Village is located in the western suburbs of the Chicago metro area with the department serving a population base of 40,000 residents. The department is an active participant within MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) and responds to more than 3,000 emergency calls annually.

The department is comprised of 35 full-time firefighter/paramedics (which includes officers and command staff), 1 full-time administrative assistant, 15 part-time firefighter/Emergency Medical Technicians, 2 volunteer chaplains and 20 volunteer Fire Corps members. Ideally, the Department recruits and tests annually for new part-time employees and bi-annually for the establishment of a full-time eligibility list. The part-time work force is fairly fluid, necessitating the testing and hiring of approximately 4-8 new employees each year to maintain a minimum pool of 15. Part-time employees, in most cases, are looking for a full-time position within a career department and normally use the position at HPFD as a stepping stone. HPFD utilizes these employees to backfill vacancies created by full-time staff vacations, Kelly days, training furlough and sick leave. Although most full-time employees come from within the

part-time ranks, not all part-time employees become full-time. However, part-time employees do the same job as the full-time staff and must meet all training and selection standards of our full-time employees. The only variation is that part-time personnel are not required to possess a paramedic license.

In order to ensure the quality of staff, irregardless of full- or part-time status, all candidates undergo the same testing process. Part-time employees are awarded 15 preference points when they test for full-time status due to their current employment with HPFD. The testing/selection process consists of the following:

Table 1: Testing Selection Process

<b><u>All Candidates</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Physical ability</li> <li>2. Written exam (general knowledge, mathematics, reading comprehension, mechanical aptitude, writing ability)</li> </ol>
<b><u>Pre-Offer</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Interview with HPFD and Village Human Resource Department staff</li> <li>2. Limited background investigation including criminal history, driving record and credit history.</li> <li>3. Integrity interview</li> </ol>
<b><u>Post-Offer</u></b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In-depth background investigation including fingerprints and (where possible) a neighborhood canvas</li> <li>2. Polygraph examination</li> <li>3. Psychological examination</li> <li>4. Medical examination (NFPA 2007 standard)</li> </ol>

The cost of screening potential employees is significant. The video-based, written exam is purchased through Ergometrics, Inc., of Lynnwood, Washington, at a cost of \$538 plus

\$30 per applicant. This test is delivered by Human Resource Department staff but is graded by Ergometrics. All other pre-offer testing components are conducted by HPFD or village staff and do not have a direct dollar cost but do require employee staff hours to conduct the process. Post-offer testing, which includes the polygraph, psychological and medical exam, costs in excess of \$700 per candidate (Village of Hanover Park, 2008). This expense is not recoverable and is considered part of the process to ensure quality employees. However, 20% of all recent post-offer candidates have been washed out of the process due to failure of the polygraph or psychological evaluations (Village of Hanover Park, 2004-2008). Over the past five years, the department has hired 54 new full- and part-time employees and post-offer tested approximately 65. The disqualified candidates cost the Village, and ultimately the taxpayers, in excess of \$7,500 (Village of Hanover Park, 2008).

Information obtained through research for this project will assist the Village of Hanover Park in determining the process used for future employee pre-employment testing. The research relates to the USFA objective of responding to appropriate emerging issues by evaluating the selection process of new fire service employees. Currently, no ARPs are listed in the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center addressing this new problem (NFA, 2008). Previous HPFD budgets reflect that disqualified candidates were not as prevalent prior to 2004 (Village of Hanover Park, 2000-2003). It also links to the Executive Leadership class by improving the knowledge, skills and attitudes of fire service leaders as it relates to the process of selecting new employees while operating within the standards of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Labor.

### Literature Review

Chief Marinucci of the Farmington Hills (MI) Fire Department, in his article “Hiring Problems,” sums up the need for detailed and comprehensive testing and background investigations when he says, “a hiring mistake will last your organization 25 years” (Richard Marinucci, March 2008). Marinucci is past president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, chair of the International Commission on Accreditation, former senior advisor to Director James Lee Witt of FEMA, and a former acting chief operating officer of the U.S. Fire Administration. He contends that when an employer experiences difficulties with an employee, the employer typically surmises that for some reason the employee has decided to be a problem. In reality, if he dug a little deeper, he would find that the employee problem existed from the beginning. The root cause of this situation was created by making a bad hire. Chief Marinucci suggests that several steps are critical in the process of hiring candidates who will serve as long-term, high- quality employees. First, employers must take their time and not rush to hire a candidate. They need to begin by reviewing the knowledge, skills and abilities required for the job as well as the soft skills of interpersonal dynamics. These skills should be advertised as part of the overall recruitment program. He suggests utilizing a comprehensive testing process that includes a written exam, a physical ability test and an interview conducted by departmental leadership. But most importantly, he stresses the need to conduct comprehensive background checks that include post-offer psychological and medical exams (Richard Marinucci, 2008).

Departments may choose pre-offer psychological testing as an option to assess candidates. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has limited these assessments and prohibits testing that might be similar in nature to a medical exam (Henry Perritt, Jr., 2002). Post-offer psychological testing is expensive, normally costing \$500 or more per candidate.

Sensitive positions involving public trust, such as police officers and firefighters, should be tested utilizing processes that do resemble medical evaluations and would, therefore, be subject to the rules of ADA (Harry Brull, 1997).

In addition to psychological evaluations, many departments also utilize polygraph testing. Although associated with diverse opinions as to validity, many federal agencies as well as state and local governments continue to utilize the process to save time and money. Admissions of wrongdoing during the pre-test, test or post-test helps employers decide if the candidate should continue forward in the hiring process or be eliminated. It also serves as a deterrent for those seeking sensitive positions that have divergences in their background that would potentially prove troublesome during the background phase of testing (Sheldon Cohen).

In New Jersey, a fire department may be held liable for negligent hiring if they knew, had reason to believe or should have known that a candidate was unfit, incompetent or exhibited previous dangerous behavior that ultimately was the proximate cause of an injury against a plaintiff. Generally, a fire department has limited protection under governmental immunity laws unless the agency is negligent. Negligent hiring claims purport that a firefighter with a questionable background and who causes an injury while employed by the department should not have been hired in the first place and, therefore, make the department negligent in its attempt to protect the public. An example comes from the New Jersey Tort Claims Act (N.J. Stat. Ann. Section 59:2-10) which infers immunity on departments for the criminal, malicious or willful acts of their employees. However, the department may be held liable for the negligent hiring or supervision of an employee. A federal court addressed this issue in 2007 when it refused to dismiss a claim against the New Jersey National Guard Youth Challenge Program when it hired an employee who allegedly sexually assaulted and raped a 16-year old cadet. Also, a plaintiff in

Texas introduced an employee's 10-year old DUI and drug possession charge as part of a negligent hiring, retention and supervision claim against a municipality for a fatal accident involving one of its garbage trucks (David Comstock, 2008).

David C. Comstock, a partner in the law firm Comstock, Springer, and Wilson of Youngstown (OH) and a 25-year veteran of the fire service and chief of the Western Reserve Joint Fire District in Poland (OH) recommends the following regarding pre-employment background investigations:

1. Complete a thorough written application. This should include prior residential addresses, educational and employment histories, terminations, traffic citations, criminal convictions and participation in civil litigations. The application should include an authorization form allowing the release of employment records from previous and current employers, educational and training records as well as credit histories.
2. An agent of the department should review the application in person with the prospective candidate.
3. Conduct a public records search as well as a police department criminal history check and a web site search on sites such as MySpace.com.
4. Conduct a governmental fingerprint search.

Chief Comstock goes on to say that departments should not be concerned about a refusal to hire based on background even if the candidate is in a protected class. He says that the courts will support a decision to not employ someone based on an unfavorable history if they can clearly articulate basis for making the decision. He writes "ignorance is no longer bliss."

John T. Bentivoglio, an associate in the law firm Miller, Cassidy, Larroca & Lewin in Washington (DC) and a volunteer firefighter/paramedic with the Kentland (MD) Volunteer Fire Department, agrees that employers can be held liable for hiring workers who pose a threat to the public or coworkers. He goes on to say that some courts have taken the aggressive stance of holding employers responsible for retaining employees who were not a threat at the time of hire but later became dangerous. He diverges slightly from the opinion of Chief Comstock, however, by cautioning departments that they are in a “Catch-22.” The courts have imposed a duty on employers to reasonably investigate potential employee backgrounds, but employers also must contend with the numerous federal and state anti-discrimination and privacy laws that limit the capability to obtain information. Bentivoglio generally believes that employers have a responsibility to conduct comprehensive background investigations due to the broad authority and trust that is placed in the hands of firefighters, but he cautions that employers must well document their reasons for washing out candidates in order to protect against claims of anti-discrimination.

Caution is the order of the day. Some courts have held that automatic rejection of applicants with an arrest or conviction has a disproportionate impact on racial minorities and violates Title VII of the 1965 Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination in employment. He recommends that employers go beyond mere arrest and conviction records to investigate the underlying circumstances of the record. Investigation findings need to be well-documented and within the established policy of the employing agency. “Departments must screen potential employees more carefully than ever before, but within the limits of federal and state law” (John Bentivoglio, 1995).

### Procedures

The research procedures were derived through numerous conversations with Sandy Richard, Director of Human Resources for the Village of Hanover Park. Director Richard holds a Master of Science Degree in Industrial Relations, is a certified professional through the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-CP), and holds the certification of Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) from the Society for Human Resources. She is also the president of the Illinois Public Employers Labor Relations Association (IPELRA). She suggested that research begin with a survey of the members of the Illinois Suburban Human Resource Directory, questioning hiring practices and washout criteria. This same survey was sent to all Illinois municipal combination and career departments as well as fire protection districts. Interviews were also conducted with Joe Banasiak, Clinical Psychologist/Public Safety Director, Steven A. Laser Associates, and several fire chiefs/administrators.

The stated survey (Appendix 1) was developed and mailed to 72 fire departments (Appendix 2) in the state of Illinois. Departments were selected from the 2009 National Directory of Fire Chiefs and EMS Administrators based on the following criteria:

- Combination and career fire departments (Volunteer departments were excluded due to their non-employment of career employees.)
- Illinois fire departments (Surveys were restricted to Illinois departments in an effort to ensure comparability between definitions, i.e. municipal, combination and career.)

The same survey was forwarded to all 47 members of the Illinois Suburban Public Human Resource Directory provided by Sandra Richard (Appendix 3). She explained that fire department hiring for communities listed on this directory was controlled primarily by the human



resource department or a fire commission and would, therefore, produce better results than requesting information from fire department administrators, who may or may not be involved in the testing and hiring process. Communities represented in this directory were excluded from the fire department list in order to eliminate redundancy.

Survey questions focused on washout rates, types of pre-offer and post-offer testing, background investigation processes, disqualifying background standards, and recruitment activities—particularly those that produce the best candidates.

Lists of interview questions were developed for the Fire Chief/Administrator interviews, for Mrs. Richard and for Mr. Banasiak. Questions are as follows:

1. Questions for Chief/Administrators:

- a. Do you conduct background investigations including polygraph and psychological testing?
  - i. If so, what are the perceived benefits?
  - ii. If you do not conduct these tests, why not?
- b. Are you pleased with your current testing process?
- c. Do you believe the cost-benefit ratio justifies the expense?
- d. In your opinion, do you have a high candidate washout percentage?

2. Questions for Mrs. Richard and Mr. Banasiak.

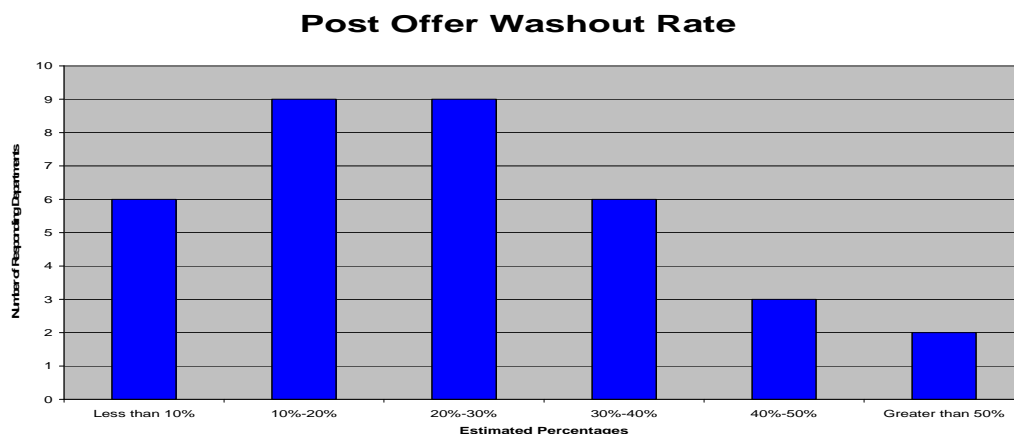
- a. What do you perceive the benefit of psychological testing to be?
- b. Explain the difference between pre-offer and post-offer psychological testing and, in your opinion, which is better?

## Results

A total of 37 surveys were returned. All but four (City of Peoria, City of Rockford, City of Galesburg, and City of Springfield) came from fire departments within the Chicago-metro area and collar counties. In three cases, duplicate information was received for a community from both their human resource department and their fire department. A follow-up telephone call was made in each case so information was treated as a single submission to avoid skewing the statistical data. Eight respondents requested that a copy of the research be forwarded to them following completion of the ARP.

Surveyed departments were asked to provide an estimated washout rate, what types of testing elements they include, and whether this testing occurred before or after a preliminary job offer (pre-offer or post-offer). Additionally, those surveyed were asked to identify what constitutes a disqualifying background, what type of recruitment activities are being used, and if any one particular method or source is more successful than another. Figure 1 displays the post-offer washout rate. Of those surveyed, between 10%-30% of all candidates tested are washed out during the post-offer process.

Figure 1:



By definition, “post-offer” is the period after the candidate has passed all prerequisite testing and was presented a conditional offer of employment. The conditional offer is contingent on their successful completion of the post-offer phase. Candidates passing these requirements will be hired by the department. Figure 2 details the phases during which specific tests are conducted.

Figure 2:

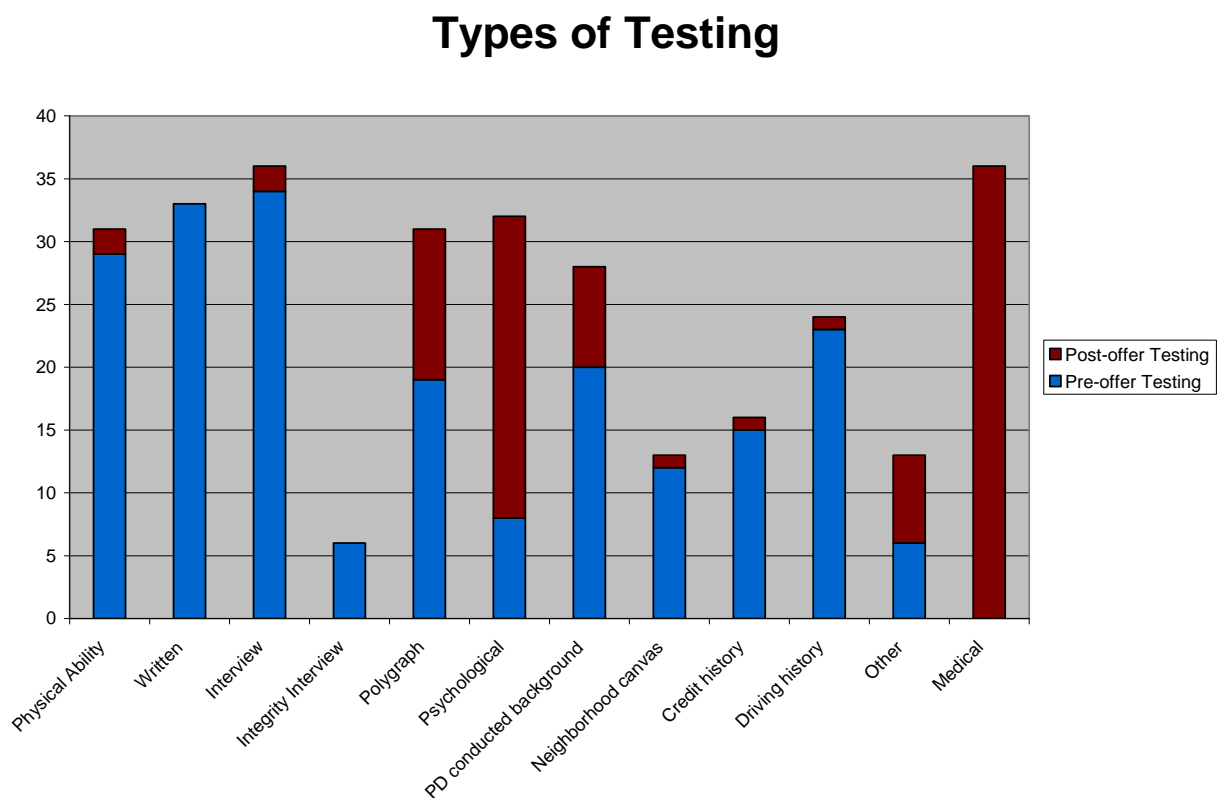


Figure 3 shows responses regarding the use of polygraph exams. Thirty-three of the respondents utilize polygraph exams in some phase of their testing, with the majority (43%) eliminating a candidate who either fails or receives an inconclusive rating. One department reported that they will allow a candidate to repeat the testing should they receive an inconclusive

rating. The disposition of the candidate, based on voluntary disclosure of information which is obtained prior to being placed on the machine, varies widely. Criminal behavior, the use of illegal drugs within the past five years, a history of fighting in the workplace, or domestic violence constitute the most common reasons a candidate rejection.

Figure 3:

<b>Disposition of Polygraph Exams</b>	
	<b>Failed or inconclusive polygraph</b>
Yes	23
No	10
	<b>Voluntary disclosure of the Following:</b>
Employer theft of over \$100	18
Use of illegal drugs within past 5 years	21
Criminal behavior within past 5 years	26
Fighting in the workplace or domestic violence	22
Employment history of terminations or erratic employment	18
Abuse of prescription drugs	17
Other	4
<b>Note:</b>	1 Department allows exam to be repeated if first is ruled inconclusive
<b>Other problematic disclosures:</b>	Conviction of DUI, admission of arson, multiple moving vehicle violations, false information on employment application and worker compensation fraud.

It appears that departments utilizing psychological testing as a component of their exam, whether pre-offer or post-offer, place a high level of confidence in the exam regarding candidate selection. Eighty-five percent of all respondents indicated that if the candidate is rated “not

recommended” they will immediately disqualify the candidate. Additionally, twenty-one percent removed candidates rated “marginally recommended.”

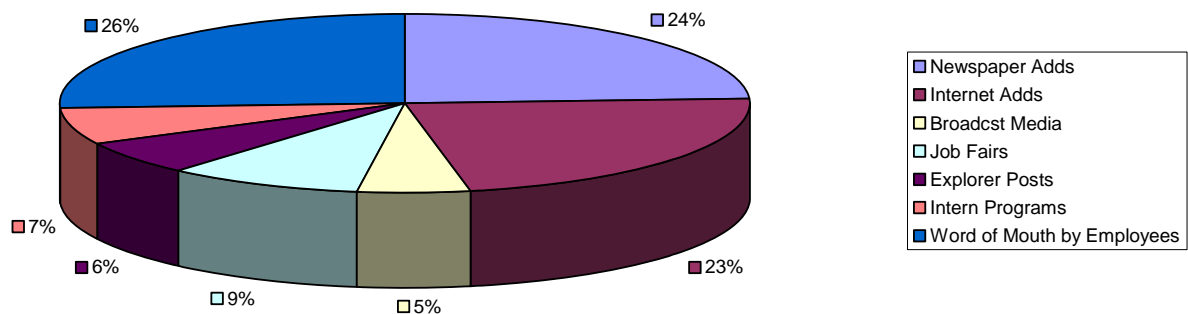
Background disqualification had a much higher level of subjectivity. Many of those surveyed evaluate background problems according to their nature and the amount of time elapsed since their occurrence. Some surveys were returned with a narrative indicating that a candidate may still be considered if significant time had passed since the objectionable behavior and if he was remorseful and changed.

Criminal activity rated the highest as a disqualifying factor with 73% of all respondents removing a candidate with a felony conviction. Only 14% would eliminate a candidate with a misdemeanor conviction. Known gang activity was an eliminating factor in 51% of respondents, and 27% would eliminate candidates based on a negative neighborhood canvas.

Numerous sources of recruitment are used by those responding to the survey. Newspaper and internet advertisements continue to be a mainstay, but word-of-mouth advertisement by current departmental employees is the leading technique. In fact, respondents identified word-of-mouth as the most successful form of recruitment and the one technique that produces the most successful candidates. Partnerships with cadet/explorer posts and college internships were rated as excellent areas for recruitment. One respondent stated that they mail a recruitment/testing flier to every address within their community in hopes of finding residents interested in a career in the fire service. Although job fairs were mentioned, few respondents identified these as highly fruitful. Department/community web sites were noted as excellent sources of information once a candidate shows an interest in a particular department. Figure 4 details specifics on sources of advertisements.

Figure 4:

## Sources of Advertisement Utilized



As a result of the survey requests, phone calls and e-mails were received asking questions about Hanover Park's current hiring practices, including recruitment and testing, and why this topic was selected for an ARP. Concerns voiced can be broken into a few broad categories:

- Recruitment of qualified candidates versus candidates who are simply looking for a job change and see public safety as a stable field with good benefits.
- Finding candidates who have a positive work history and the inability to get previous or current employers to provide information during reference checks.
- Finding candidates who do not have a history of drug use, driving under the influence, employer theft, and personal credit concerns.
- Retention of candidates. Due to the number of career fire departments in the Chicago-metro area, firefighters are often hired by one department, allowing that organization to pay for additional training including certification as a Firefighter II

and paramedic. Then, with their new qualifications, they test for a position on another department. Since salaries and packages vary between departments, some firefighters change employers a number of times in order to find the highest-paying.

- Loyalty to the department--the “it’s all about me” philosophy.
- Professional appearance. Many current candidates have body art or piercing located on the face and neck or on the arms and hands to the extent that they cannot be covered by clothing. This presents a problem when trying to project a professional, uniformed image.

Several departments were interested in information on our part-time program and requested a copy of our SEIU Local 73 collective bargaining agreement. This agreement is somewhat unique to Hanover Park in that we have both a unionized full-time workforce as well as a unionized part-time workforce. The two groups get along well and do not see each other as competition but rather a collaborative partnership.

Interviews also provided insight into the thought process behind testing. Deputy Fire Chief Mark Hudson of the Streamwood (IL) Fire Department commented that candidates are a long-term investment and that we must be cognizant to hire not only the best qualified but also the ones best fit with our organizations. The Streamwood Fire Department readily washes out 50% of all post-offer candidates. Although Chief Hudson is interested in reducing this number due to the associated testing costs, he admits that his department has few problems with employees once hired (Mark Hudson, personal communication, June 26, 2008).

Similarly, Chief Jeff Welch (retired), Northern Lakes Fire Rescue (ID), stresses the importance of making the right employee selections. “Firefighters are part of a team that takes

care of our residents at times of great need, it is imperative to hire employees who are all going to pull the rope in the same direction” (Jeff Welch, personal communication, April 26, 2008).

Assistant Fire Chief William Anderson of the Bartlett Fire Protection District (IL) relies on psychological and polygraph testing for new candidates. His department is willing to pay for these tests but, in an attempt to save money, will accept the exams conducted by other departments if they are less than one year old. He explains that departments in the Chicago-metro area are all competing from the same employee labor pool. A candidate who was hired as a part-time firefighter in a neighboring department will likely be testing for full-time positions in agencies in the same geographical area. Therefore, a Hanover Park part-time firefighter who recently tested and was hired by Hanover Park may be called to be a full-time firefighter by Bartlett. In this case, Chief Anderson asks the employing department to release the testing records of their employee. This process can save the district thousands of dollars and alleviates the stress imposed on potential candidates (William Anderson, personal communication, August 20, 2008).

Some departments wish they could conduct a comprehensive new candidate background test but are prohibited due to the cost. Assistant Chief Michael Merritt of the City of King (NC) Fire Department said that he simply does not have the funds to evaluate a candidate to this level. His department does the best they can to check work history, references, and opinions of colleagues, but they cannot take the extra steps of polygraph and psychological testing. The City of King employs full-time career firefighters, part-time firefighters and volunteers. In this day and age of reduced volunteer interest and commitment, this type of scrutiny will likely minimize the already small volunteer pool needed to serve a community. “We try and check them out the



best we can and then hope for the best; we simply have no other choice” (Michael Merritt, personal communication, October 24, 2008).

Joe Banasiak, Clinical Psychologist and Public Safety Director for Steven A. Laser Associates, feels it is a worthwhile venture to screen out potentially bad employees prior to being hired and costing the department time and money to deal with bad behavior or terminations. Mr. Banasiak goes on to recommend post-offer psychological testing to ensure that candidates possess not only the skill-set identified through pre-offer testing but also the mental capacity to deal with life in the fire station as well the emotional impact of emergency services. He explained that post-offer psychological testing is considered a medical exam and can, therefore, be much more comprehensive and provide better insight into the candidate. Post-offer testing utilizes a variety of instruments, and attempts to identify problems such as paranoid schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and antisocial personality disorder. The drawback is the cost to employers for a potential employee that will never be hired. Mr. Banasiak states that 20%-30% of all public safety candidates assessed by his firm do not pass and are not recommended for employment. (Joe Banasiak, personal communication, October 6, 2008).

Regarding polygraph exams, Sandra Richard, Director of Human Resources, Village of Hanover Park, states that some of the most useful information gained from the polygraph testing is the information obtained through pre-test questioning. Candidate admissions regarding illicit drug use, employer theft, violence in the workplace, domestic violence, and criminal behavior prior to being hooked to the machine all provide valuable insight into the potential employee. Admissions of this nature do not always result in an immediate disqualification but provide topics that can be probed further to determine a candidate’s eligibility. Mrs. Richard referred to an example of an employee who tried marijuana ten years ago while in high school and admitted

to no further use. “We are more interested in what the candidate learned from the experience, and whether they grew from it, rather than whether or not they tried it [marijuana]” (Sandra Richard, personal communication, November 12, 2008).

Finally, an unsolicited letter was received from Mr. Dan Skoczylas, president of CLS Background Investigations of Lockport (IL). Skoczylas is a former police officer and investigator and has over 25 years experience conducting background investigations for public safety employees in private business, local government, state and federal agencies. He heard about my research and hoped to assist by providing experience obtained through countless pre-employment investigations conducted for his firm’s clients. He stressed the importance of comprehensive background checks and the usefulness of information obtained through the investigative process to enhance the effectiveness of the polygraph and psychological testing. He suggested that a reputable background investigation firm should be able to process a firefighter applicant for around \$125. The cost of the polygraph and psychological would be in addition to this amount.

In addition, Mr. Skoczylas cautioned about potential pitfalls of having the police department conduct pre-employment/post-offer background checks. He stated that the police departments use LEADS, and the SOS office files are restricted to law enforcement and police department internal hiring purposes. He suggested that background investigations for an outside entity, including the municipal fire department, would be a violation of the LEADS agreement and would subject them to fines and possible loss of LEADS access. Furthermore, obtaining information through LEADS and SOS to obtain driving records and arrest records places the police department in the position of functioning as a credit reporting agency which binds the police department and the fire department to the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) and all

Federal Trade Commission (FTC) rules and regulations and state laws for reporting. Failure to comply with these regulations carries heavy fines. This is why he believed background investigations are a specialty and should be outsourced (Dan Skoczylas, personal communication, September 11, 2008).

### Discussion

The hypothesis that similar departments are seeing similar results related to “washout” rates of candidates is verified. Hanover Park is experiencing around a 20% loss of candidates due to background. This percentage is well within a similar range of the surveyed departments. Thus, Hanover Park candidates are no worse or no better than those tested by other departments.

The varying testing techniques and patterns are an interesting subject of review. Almost all respondents conducted a physical ability test as well as a written exam. All departments interview their candidates and all conduct a pre-employment medical screening. The divergence of testing occurs in the area of polygraph, psychological and background investigations and history. It is interesting that more departments utilize the polygraph exam as a pre-offer testing component than those who use it as a post-offer. The fact that this process is costly and would be conducted on a potentially large number of candidates seems an expensive method of screening. Similarly, pre-offer psychological exams are limited in depth due to ADA restrictions. It would appear that a more efficient system would be to conduct this portion post-offer along with the medical screening/exam to ensure a comprehensive review of both the physical and mental condition of applicants.

Of most interest, however, are the varying disqualifying backgrounds utilized and the subjectivity in this area. Overall, the responses were surprising and seem to be very random in nature. For example, some departments will eliminate a candidate for criminal behavior

occurring within the last five years but allow a candidate to pass with a history of illegal drug usage. Ninety-seven percent of respondents “wrote in” that they would remove a candidate for multiple motor vehicle moving violations. Fifty-one percent indicated that they would washout someone for known gang activity. Initially, it appeared the high removal for moving violations versus gang activity might be based on geographical location, except almost all respondents came from the same area of Illinois (northeast corner). A number of respondents indicated that all hiring is governed by a fire commission and that they, as the employer, have no say as to what guidelines are utilized for disqualification.

It is also surprising that 27% of respondents indicate that they will disqualify a candidate based on a neighborhood canvas. During interviews with Sandra Richard, she indicated that although neighborhood canvases have been an integral part of the process for many years, many departments are opting away from this tool. With changing demographics and transient workforces, along with the denigration of neighborhoods where neighbors know their neighbors, these types of surveys tend to prove ineffective (Sandra Richard, personal communication, November 20, 2008).

Recruitment techniques are similar among respondents, however, a number indicate that they would eliminate a candidate with a history of erratic employment or “job jumping” but admit that they send recruitment fliers to area fire departments. In its purest sense, this probably is not a problem, but it certainly fosters the potential to lure employees from neighboring departments. This technique is fostered by the willingness of the Illinois Fire Chiefs and the Illinois Fire Chiefs’ Secretaries’ Association to send out job postings through their blast e-mail systems. These organizations are hoping to facilitate recruitment of candidates who are volunteers looking for a career in the fire service or part-time firefighters looking for full-time

employment. However, it unintentionally encourages an atmosphere of “job jumping” in accordance with the old adage “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” or firefighters simply change jobs for higher pay.

Most departments also state that they try and recruit paramedics from the private ambulance services with the promise of better benefits, work conditions and pension systems. Techniques of posting fliers in hospital emergency rooms and mailings to all Illinois licensed paramedics are stated to work well. Some departments mail recruitment materials to all nationally registered paramedics listed on the official registry. One surveyed department has a strict residency requirement within the corporate boundaries of their community and sends out direct mailings to all residents notifying them of upcoming tests.

A frequent comment made by respondents is the importance of a well-designed and accessible web site. Although candidates may find out about upcoming recruitments through a variety of methods, their primary source of information about the department is through the organization’s web site. Hanover Park’s Chief Information Officer, George Dimidik, advises that candidates interested in testing will likely research the department and will either increase or decrease their interest based on what they see on the web site. Information pertaining to department activities, call volume and type, apparatus, stations and staffing levels are all important components for attracting candidates (George Dimidik, personal communication, October 30, 2008).

Although not part of the survey, numerous discussions with fire service leaders indicate that many departments are switching to the CPAT (Candidate Physical Ability Test) as the preferred method of evaluating the physical ability of candidates. This test was jointly developed by the International Association of Fire Fighters and the International Association of

Fire Chiefs and meets the validity criteria of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Labor. The test is designed to predict a candidate's ability to perform the essential functions required on the fire scene including:

- Stair Climb
- Hose Drag
- Equipment Carry
- Ladder Raise and Extension
- Forcible Entry
- Search
- Rescue
- Ceiling Breach and Pull

To ensure that all candidates have an equal opportunity to succeed, the CPAT process provides for a pre-test and an 8-week preparation program which includes recommended physical training drills and the opportunity to practice prior to the exam. Candidates do not need to have previous fire service experience to be successful in the CPAT process. (NIPSTA, 2008)

Many departments require that candidates provide a valid CPAT certification that is less than one year old at the time of application. This ensures the physical ability of the candidate while saving the dollars associated with conducting a department specific physical ability exam. Departments developing their own test must ensure the validity of the exam and subject themselves to the possibility of legal action should their test be found to be discriminatory (Sandy Richard, personal communication, August 24, 2008).

As an example, Hanover Park's last non-CPAT physical ability test cost over \$2,400 in overtime to conduct a practice exam and the actual test four weeks later. This does not include

the cost of validating the exam four years ago when the test was developed and the likely financial risk associated with a discrimination claim. Also possible is a claim from a candidate injured during the testing process based on any number of issues including faulty equipment, a flawed facility or an error by a firefighter conducting the test.

### Recommendations

Based on information obtained through this applied research project, several recommendations can be made.

1. Continue candidate testing utilizing the same testing schedule currently being employed as outlined in the background and significance section of this document.
2. Outsource the background investigations as suggested by Dan Skoczylas, CLS Background Investigations. This practice would eliminate the questionable practice of the Hanover Park Police Department utilizing LEADS and SOS to conduct background investigations on non-police personnel, thereby reducing the potential risk to their agency. This would also free up staff time of Human Resource Department personnel who currently conduct some parts of the background checks.
3. Immediately switch to the CPAT exam for the physical ability section of testing. This will eliminate the potential for a legal challenge of the existing exam as well as the liability associated with conducting an exam in-house. The savings in overtime dollars can be redirected to pay for the outsourced background investigations.
4. Develop a training program for current department employees teaching them how to constantly seek possible candidates. Include in this process information on how to share the benefits of being a Hanover Park firefighter and how to obtain information regarding the next recruitment cycle. Each employee should be issued business cards with

recruitment information printed on the reverse side. Offer a financial reward to employees who find new candidates who make it through the testing process and are hired by the department.

5. Work through the Information Technologies Department to update the Village's web site in order to peak and hold the interest of potential employees. Develop an online application and/or an online request for information on upcoming tests.

In conclusion, the research provided helpful information to assess the current practices utilized by HPFD. The question of whether HPFD has a higher washout rate than comparable was answered as well as techniques identified to enhance the existing process, reduce liability and produce candidates that will provide high quality service to the residents and visitors of the Village of Hanover Park.



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## Appendix 1

## Village of Hanover Park

Fire Department  
6850 Barrington Road

Municipal Building  
2121 West Lake Street  
Hanover Park, Illinois  
60133-4398

630-372-4200  
Fax 630-372-4215

Rodney S. Craig  
Village President

Sherry L. Craig  
Village Clerk

Marc G. Hummel  
Village Manager



September 10, 2008

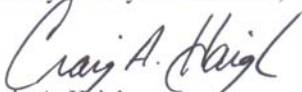
«Salutation» «First\_Name» «Last\_Name»  
«Company\_Name»  
«Address\_Line\_1»  
«City», «State» «ZIP\_Code»

Dear «Salutation» «Last\_Name»:

As part of the Executive Fire Officer Educational Program at the National Fire Academy, I am completing an applied research paper on disqualifying backgrounds for fire department employees. The Hanover Park Fire Department in cooperation with the Village's Human Resource Department conducts extensive background checks, including polygraph and psychological exams on all post offer candidates. During the past five years over 20% of all candidates tested failed one or more of these components. At a cost of over \$700 per applicant, these failures place a significant financial burden on taxpayers who must absorb the costs associated with additional testing to find suitable employees. The purpose of my research is to identify if this trend is being seen by other fire service employers and if different pre-offer recruitment and testing practices exist that will produce better qualified candidates.

I ask that you please complete the attached survey. After you have completed the survey, please send it back to me via email at [chaigh@hpil.org](mailto:chaigh@hpil.org) or fax to 630/736-6810 by **September 26, 2008**. Also, email me if you are interested in the final results of this survey.

Thank you for your assistance,

  
Craig A. Haigh, CFO, NREMT-P  
Fire Chief



## BACKGROUND CHECK QUALIFICATIONS SURVEY

*Department Completing*

*Survey*

*Individual Completing Survey*

*Department Address*

*City, State, Zip*

*Department Phone Number*

### Survey Questions

1. What is your communities estimated post-offer employee “washout” rate?

☐ 50% or higher

☐ 40-50%

☐ 30-40%

☐ 20- 30%

☐ 10%-20%

☐ Less than 10%

2. What types of post-offer testing is being utilized?

☐ Medical Exam

☐ Polygraph

☐ Psychological

☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. What types of pre-offer testing is being utilized?

☐ Physical ability

☐ Written

☐ Interview

☐ Integrity Interview

☐ Polygraph

☐ Psychological

☐ Police Department conducted background checks

☐ Neighbor canvas

☐ Credit History

☐ Driving History

☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. What constitutes a disqualifying background?

☐ Failed or inconclusive polygraph exam?

☐ Information disclosure of:

☐ *Employer theft over \$100*

☐ *Use of illegal drugs within past 5 years*

☐ *Criminal behavior within past 5 years*

☐ *Fighting in the workplace or domestic violence*

☐ *Employment history (terminations, erratic employment, etc.)*

☐ *Abuse of prescription drugs*

☐ *Other* \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Psychological rating of marginal

☐ Psychological rating of not recommended

☐ Identified problems from police department background check

☐ *Known gang activity*

☐ *Criminal record including felony conviction*

☐ *Misdemeanor conviction*

☐ Negative results from neighborhood canvas

5. What recruitment activities are being used?

- ☐ Adds in local newspapers
- ☐ Internet based fire service employment ads
- ☐ Broadcast media
- ☐ Job fairs
- ☐ Allegiance with:
  - ☐ *Explorer posts*
  - ☐ *College intern programs*
- ☐ Word of mouth recruitment by existing employees
- ☐ Others \_\_\_\_\_

6. What two recruitment activities produce your best and most qualified employees?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

***Names Query of Surveyed Departments/Communities***

<b>Department</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Zip Code</b>
Addison	10 South Addison	Addison	IL	60101
Algonquin-Lake in the Hills	1020 W. Algonquin Road	Lake in the Hills	IL	60156
Alsip	12600 S. Pulaski	Alsip	IL	60803
Alton	333 E. 20 <sup>th</sup> Street	Alton	IL	62002
Bartlett	234 North Oak Ave	Bartlett	IL	60103
Beardstown	1119 Edwards Street	Beardstown	IL	62618
Bedford Park	6820 S. Archer Road	Bedford Park	IL	60501
Belleville	213 S. Illinois Street	Belleville	IL	62220
Belvidere	123 S. State Street	Belvidere	IL	
Bensenville	500 S. York Road	Bensenville	IL	60106
Berwyn	6700 W. 26 <sup>th</sup> Street	Berwyn	IL	60402
Bloomington	179 S. Bloomington	Bloomington	IL	60108



Bloomington	310 N. Lee Street	Bloomington	IL	61701
Blue Island	2450 W. Vermont	Blue Island	IL	60406
Bourbonnais	1080 Armour Road	Bourbonnais	IL	60914
Bradley	147 S. Michigan	Bradley	IL	60915
Bridgeview	7500 S. Olketo Ave	Bridgeview	IL	60455
Brisson-Kendall	103 E. Beaver Street	Yorkville	IL	60560
Broadview	2400 S. 25 <sup>th</sup> Ave	Broadview	IL	60155
Brookfield	9001 Shields Ave	Brookfield	IL	60513
Burbank	6530 W. 79 <sup>th</sup> Street	Burbank	IL	60459
Burlington Community	154 South Street	Burlington	IL	60109
Byron	123 Franklin Street	Byron	IL	61010
Calumet City	684 Wentworth Ave	Calumet City	IL	60409
Carbondale	200 S. Illinois Ave	Carbondale	IL	62902
Cario	1513 Washington	Cario	IL	62914
Carol Stream	365 Kuhn Road	Carol Stream	IL	60188
Carpentersville	213 Spring Street	Carpentersville	IL	60110
Cary	400 Algonquin Road	Cary	IL	60013

Central Stickney	4951 S. Lotus Ave	Stickney Twp.	IL	60638
Centralia	222 S. Poplar Street	Centralia	IL	62801
Charleston	404 10 <sup>th</sup> Street	Charleston	IL	61920
Chatham	1 Fireman Square	Chatham	IL	61920
Cherry Valley	120 E. State Street	Cherry Valley	IL	61016
Chicago	10 W. 35 <sup>th</sup> Street	Chicago	IL	61016
Chicago Heights	83 E. Joe Orr Road	Chicago	IL	60411
Cicero	5303 W. 15 <sup>th</sup> Street	Cicero	IL	60804
Clarendon Hills	316 Park Ave	Clarendon Hills	IL	60514
Collinsville	130 S. Clinton	Collinsville	IL	62234
Country Club Hills	4350 183 <sup>rd</sup> Street	Country Club Hills	IL	60478
Countryside	700 Deerpath Drive	Vernon Hills	IL	60061
Crestwood	13840 S. Cicero	Crestwood	IL	60445
Danville	1111 N. Griffin Street	Danville	IL	61832
Darien-Woodridge	7550 Lynman Ave	Darien	IL	60561
Decatur	1415 N. Water Street	Decatur	IL	62526
Dixon	210 S. Hennepin	Dixon	IL	61021

Dixon Rural	1020 Palmyra St.	Dixon	IL	61021
Dolton	14022 Park Avenue	Dolton	IL	60419
DuPage County Office of Emer. Mgmt.	136 N. County Farm Road	Wheaton	IL	60187
East Dundee	115 East Third Steet	East Dundee	IL	60118
East Moline	1523 Morton Drive	East Moline	IL	61244
East Peoria	201 W. Washington	East Peoria	IL	61611
East Saint Louis	310 Riverpark Drive	East Saint Louis	IL	62201
Edwardsville	410 N. Main Street	Edwardsville	IL	62025
Effingham	505 W. Fayette Ave	Effingham	IL	62401
Elburn-Countryside	210 E. North Street	Elburn	IL	60119
Elgin	550 Summit Street	Elgin	IL	60120
Elk Grove Township	1415 E. Algonquin	Arlington Heights	IL	60005
Elk Grove Village	901 Brantwood Ave	Elk Grove Village	IL	60007
Glenside	1608 Bloomingdale	Glendale Heights	IL	60139
Hampshire	P.O. Box 245	Hampshire	IL	60140

Hoffman Estates	1900 Hassell Road	Hoffman Estates	IL	60195
Itasca	520 West Irving Park	Itasca	IL	60143
LaGrange	53 S. LaGrange Road	LaGrange	IL	60525
Lincolnwood	6900 North Lincoln	Lincolnwood	IL	60646
North Chicago	1850 Lewis Ave	North Chicago	IL	60064
Oak Brook	1200 Oak Brook Road	Oak Brook	IL	60521
Park Ridge	505 Butler Place	Park Ridge	IL	60068-4182
Pingree Grove	39W160 Plank Road	Elgin	IL	60123
Roselle	100 East Maple	Roselle	IL	60172
Rutland Dundee	11 E. Higgins	Gilberts	IL	62983
Schaumburg	1601 North Roselle	Schaumburg	IL	60195
South Elgin	150 West State Street	South Elgin	IL	60177
St. Charles	112 N. 1 <sup>st</sup> Ave	St. Charles	IL	60174
Streamwood	1095 East	Streamwood	IL	60107
West Chicago	200 Freemont Street	West Chicago	IL	60185
West Dundee	100 Carrington Drive	West Dundee	IL	60118

Western Springs	740 Hillgrove Ave	Western Springs	IL	60558
Wheaton	One Fapp Circle	Wheaton	IL	60187
Winfield	27W530 High Lake	Winfield	IL	60190
Wood Dale	589 N. Wood Dale	Wood Dale	IL	60191

## Appendix 3

***Names Query of Surveyed Communities from the  
Suburban Public Human Resource Directory***

<b>Community</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Zip Code</b>
Arlington Heights	33 S. Arlington Heights Road	Arlington Heights	IL	60005
Aurora	44 E. Downers Place	Aurora	IL	60507
Barrington	200 S. Hough Street	Barrington	IL	60010
Batavia	100 North Island Avenue	Batavia	IL	60510
Bolingbrook	375 W. Briarcliff Road	Bolingbrook	IL	60440
Buffalo Grove	50 Raupp Boulevard	Buffalo Grove	IL	60089
Crystal Lake	100 W. Municipal Complex	Crystal Lake	IL	60039
DeKalb	200 South Fourth Street	DeKalb	IL	60115
Des Plaines	1420 Miner Street #503	Des Plaines	IL	60016
Downers Grove	801 Burlington Avenue	Downers Grove	IL	60515
Elmhurst	209 North York Street	Elmhurst	IL	60126

Evanston	2100 Ridge Avenue	Evanston	IL	60201
Glenview	1225 Waukegan Road	Glenview	IL	60025
Gurnee	325 N. O'Plaine Road	Gurnee	IL	60031
Highland Park	1707 St. Johns Avenue	Highland Park	IL	60035
Joliet	150 W. Jefferson Street	Joliet	IL	60432
Lake Bluff	40 E. Center Avenue	Lake Bluff	IL	60045
Lake Forest	220 East Deerpath Road	Lake Forest	IL	60045
Libertyville	118 West Cook Avenue	Libertyville	IL	60048
Lombard	255 E. Wilson Avenue	Lombard	IL	60148
Mount Prospect	50 S. Emerson Street	Mount Prospect	IL	60056
Naperville	400 S. Eagle Street	Naperville	IL	60566
Niles	1000 Civic Center Drive	Niles	IL	60714
Northbrook	1225 Cedar Lane	Northbrook	IL	60025
Palatine	200 E. Wood Street	Palatine	IL	60067
Oak Park	1 Village Hall Plaza	Oak Park	IL	60302
Park Ridge	505 Butler Place	Park Ridge	IL	60068

Rolling Meadows	3600 Kirchoff Road	Rolling Meadows	IL	60008
Rosemont	9501 W. Devon Avenue, #204	Rosemont	IL	60018
Skokie	5127 Oakton Street	Skokie	IL	60077
St. Charles	2 E. Main Street	St. Charles	IL	60174
Waukegan	410 Robert V. Sabonjian Place	Waukegan	IL	60085
Wheeling	255 W. Dundee Road	Wheeling	IL	60090
Wilmette	1200 Wilmette Avenue	Wilmette	IL	60093